

Article of the Month – December 2010

Missiological Observations in the OT (3) – Ecclesiastes

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In our short series on Old Testament mission perspectives, we now consider Ecclesiastes. There we see almost another Solomon than the one who wrote Proverbs.¹ The latter he wrote at the zenith of his career; the former when he was old, and it breathes the atmosphere of a man writing his memoirs. He observes meaninglessness because he only looks at temporary, material things. He just uses his five senses. All pleasures and achievements only provided a meaningless reward because they were separated

from eternal values.²

He speaks about the heavy burden that God has laid on man; how different from the easy yoke Jesus offers.³ The result is despair and his reaction one of *carpe diem* – an enjoy-the-day-mentality.⁴ Some understanding dawns on him when God enters the scene briefly.⁵

One moment he recognizes man's eternal value, the next he compares him with animals;⁶ quite different from how David described man.⁷ Man's highest goal, according to Solomon, is happiness.⁸ This is humanistic hedonism, not Godly wisdom, because it places man in the centre. Pain and suffering generate severe pessimism because they are not being explained from an eternal perspective.⁹

Suddenly true wisdom reappears¹⁰ ('two are better than one') whether it applies to friends, married couples or missionary teams. It is obvious: when he writes about God, there is wisdom in his words; when he turns his eyes away from Him, despair and hopelessness hit.¹¹ The 'gift of God' (material enjoyment, according to Solomon) seems to be the only pleasant thing in life. How empty and un-biblical this view is.¹²

His message of despair and hopelessness goes on for another chapter (6). Chs. 7 & 10 remind us of Proverbs in style but sometimes lack its profoundness and caliber.¹³ He shows that also

¹ E.g. Eccl. 1:17 & 2:15

² 2:10,11,14b, 16

³ Compare Ecc. 1:1b with e.g. Matt. 11:30

⁴ Eccl. 2:20,24

⁵ 2:25

⁶ Compare 3:11 with 3:18-21

⁷ Ps. 8:4-8

⁸ Eccl. 3:22

⁹ Compare e.g. 4:1-3 with Rom. 8:28

¹⁰ Eccl. 4:9-12

¹¹ Compare 5:1-7 with 5:8-17

¹² Compare 5:18-20 e.g. with 1 Cor. 15:58; Col. 3:23,24 or Heb. 11:23-26

¹³ E.g. that 'money is a shelter' and 'good for everything', 7:12 & 10:19c

in similar other statements.¹⁴ These cannot be considered Godly wisdom because they contradict the spirit of the Gospel.¹⁵ Solomon's wisdom faded because of his idolatry, following his marriages with many women from gentile nations.¹⁶

In chapter 8 he does say that God-fearing people will be better off, but this knowledge doesn't seem to comfort him; for Solomon it all boils down to the fact that life is meaningless because man cannot understand it.¹⁷ That is logical when you do not take into consideration the life to come and its eternal perspectives. He even said 'everything *to come* is meaningless'.¹⁸ Man may not understand the meaning of (his) life; God does.¹⁹ Despair is heard: God has everything for the righteous and wise in His hand. But who *is* He? Can He be trusted? He is so unpredictable, Solomon seems to say.²⁰

This conclusion can only come from one who neither knows the all-good character of God, nor the all-evil character of the devil, and thus attributes both to the same source which he calls 'God'. The devil is in hiding, an invisible foe who was not reckoned with. Because of this limited insight it looks as if everybody undergoes the same fate; if there is no eternal reward or punishment ('love, hate and jealousy vanish') then there can be only one 'gospel' which says: enjoy life and don't bother about meaning.²¹ Just as he said before: when you enjoy yourself you will not reflect on your days and be tortured by its apparent meaninglessness.²² He denies the reality of a life-to-come.²³ Later, Paul said something entirely different: 'then we will know fully...'.²⁴ Solomon saw no divine guidance: 'time and *chance happen* to all'.²⁵ The realization that judgment is to come²⁶ – with either reward or punishment – was no determining factor in Solomon's life.

A beautiful parable suddenly pops up as an Evangelical gem in the midst of all this despair.²⁷ The poor wise man represents Jesus, Who can save the little city (the world) from the oppression of the great king (the devil). The saved inhabitants (ungrateful humanity) then forget about Him.

We do see some missionary principles in the dynamic of sowing and reaping, the rebuke not to look for excuses not to work, and the encouragement to not give up.²⁸

I described the philosophy behind Ecclesiastes because it shows some dynamics of semi-religious humanistic thinking, a belief-system often found in First World countries. The growing number of Third World missionaries who minister there, justifies an explanation of this way of thinking, so that they can see through the pitfalls of unbelief, materialism and sometimes even prosperity-teaching that this worldview contains. Their views on the invisible world as well as their biblical

¹⁴ E.g. that his life is meaningless (7:15) or that he did not find one upright woman among a thousand (7:28)

¹⁵ E.g. 1 Tim. 6:10,11; Eph. 2:10 and Rom. 16:1-4,6,12a respectively

¹⁶ Some of the pain this brought we see reflected in 7:26 'I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare'

¹⁷ Eccl. 8:12,17

¹⁸ 11:8b, italics mine

¹⁹ Is. 55:8,9

²⁰ Eccl. 9:1

²¹ 9:2-9

²² 5:20

²³ 9:10

²⁴ 1 Cor. 13:12

²⁵ Eccl. 9:11b,12 (italics mine)

²⁶ 12:14

²⁷ 9:13-16

²⁸ 11:1,2,4 and 6 respectively

concept of God must be heard again. The emptiness of the 'gospel' of Ecclesiastes, often preached in the West, must be replaced again by the true Gospel of Jesus Christ.